



FIREFIGHTER LIFE SAFETY

*A Bulletin From the National
Fallen Firefighters Foundation*

December 2004

On behalf of the Board of Directors and Foundation staff, please accept our most sincere wishes for a joyous holiday season and a prosperous New Year. If 2005 is anything like 2004 was for the Foundation, I am sure that a great deal of progress will be made in our efforts to reduce the number of firefighters who die in the line-of-duty each year. A great deal of preparatory work has been completed and we should be up and running with the program at full speed in the first quarter of the New Year.

Planning is already underway for the Wildland Mini-Summit that will be held in San Diego on February 1, the Training and Research Mini-Summit that will be held in conjunction with FDIC in April, and the Structural Mini-Summit at Firehouse Expo in July. These three events and a fourth still to be identified will provide opportunities for even more fire service members and organizations to join in our efforts.

Everything we are doing now is a direct result of the work that was developed during our historic National Summit in Tampa this past March. The Mini-Summits will continue the established efforts to implement our sixteen firefighter life safety initiatives.

In addition to these Mini-Summits, the Foundation has been working with NIST to develop a National Fire Service Research Agenda in support of the Line-of-Duty Death Prevention Program. It is planned to host a research agenda forum during 2005 to bring together research leaders from across the country. This project is

directed toward developing a unified research agenda that is driven by fire service needs and not by special interests of any kind. This will prove to be a very exciting project, allowing the fire service to establish our own research needs on a national scale.

Recently, the Foundation was provided a copy of the most recent Seat Belt Usage Article that was written by Dr. Burton Clark, Instructional Staff at the National Fire Academy. Burt has been a long time supporter of our efforts to reduce the number of firefighter's lives that are lost in service to their communities. He offered this article for use by the Foundation. We hope you take the time to read this interesting perspective on firefighter safety.

"I don't need to wear my seat belt because..."

By Dr. Burton A. Clark, EFO, CFO

...no firefighter I know has ever been killed because they didn't wear their seat belt." This is the latest excuse I was given by a firefighter for not using his seat belt. He made the statement in front of the department's safety officer and other firefighters at a social event. Adult beverages were being served so his illogical thinking may have been do to a loss of brain cells. The safety officer commented to me later that the department still has a lot of work to do to achieve a 100% seat belt use compliance rate.

The logic (excuse) for not following a safety procedure because nothing bad ever happened to you or anyone you know, goes beyond seat belts, it is the root cause of our poor safety culture. We know the safety doctrine, we have the skill to perform, we have the equipment but we choose not to make safety a priority.

The fire service relies a lot on experience as the best teacher. If that experience includes not following safety procedures with no negative outcome, we perpetuate the wrong behavior. If the company officer reinforces the wrong behavior by not

correcting it, doing it them self, or not disciplining the wrong behavior, it is repeated. If the Battalion Chief sees the failure to follow safety procedures and turns a blind eye, the wrong behavior is accepted. If the Fire Chief knows the safety rules are not being followed, they are condoning a poor safety culture as the department standard.

The firefighter's excuse for not using his seat belt is bad enough but the logic I was given by a deputy fire chief from a large metropolitan fire department disturbs me even more. This chief officer is a national speaker and author who I personally respect very highly. When I asked him what his fire department was doing to get seat belt use compliance his answer was, "Seat belts are not a priority for us. You have to pick what is important." This justification for not enforcing seat belt rules is not illogical; it is purposeful, thought out, intentional and very dangerous. If he is correct we need to eliminate our seat belt SOP's and remove seat belts from fire apparatus. I did not get to ask him if he used his seat belt in the chief's car.

The fact is safety standards, SOPs, and equipment of today did come about because some firefighter, in many cases more then one, was injured or killed. The fallen firefighter's friends and fire department demanded that changes in equipment, training, standards, and operations be made so it did not happen again. We do not want firefighters to die in vain.

All aspects of firefighter safety must be a priority. If we only follow the safety doctrine that is convenient, our poor safety record will continue. Worse yet, if we only follow the safety rules after a firefighter we know is killed or hurt, what does that say about who we are and the price, in death and injury, we are willing to pay.

The problem is we do not know our history. So we are destined to repeat the mistakes of the past. At a deeper level we dishonor those who came before us and in many cases they gave their life so we can be safer today.

But one person can learn from the past and become a leader in creating a positive

safety culture in their fire department. Engineer Duane Hughes, Engine 1 Columbus Mississippi Fire Department is making a big difference in his department after he met Engineer Hugh Lee Newell. We can all learn from the following story.

Taking a Stand on Seat Belt Use, Hugh Lee's Story: by Duane Hughes

Traditionally, leadership in the fire service has been seen reserved for the higher ranks. Rarely have foot soldiers established fire department policy or vision. Recently, I was presented with an opportunity to change this standard. Simply stated, I challenged firefighters to use seat belts. Holding the rank of Engineer, I was able to persuade many in my department that seat belt use is not optional. With determination and a little courage, I proved leadership can spring from the lower ranks.

Two years ago, I attended an Interpersonal Dynamics Course at the National Fire Academy. Dr. Burt Clark appeared in class and gave a speech concerning seat belts and their lack of use in the fire service. Although I was not a supporter of seat belt use, the forcefulness of Dr. Clark's speech struck a chord within me. When I returned to my department, I described the class to my station crew. After detailing the wonderful experience of the preceding two weeks, I mentioned Dr. Clark's speech. I remember telling the guys how I thought Dr. Clark was fighting a lost cause. "Not a lost cause, a just cause," responded Battalion Chief Truman Oswalt. Chief Oswalt was a long time member of our department, and was affectionately known as "Hobby" by the guys. Hobby directed me to the hallway of our number one station. Arranged along the walls were pictures detailing the exploits of our department. {Some of the older pictures dated back to the late 1800's.} Hobby pointed towards an old black and white photo. The framed picture showed a firefighter in an old style dress uniform. Fastened to the bottom of the frame was a small metal tag which read, "Hugh Lee Newell - Sept. 11, 1931 / Oct. 1, 1972 - Our Friend". Hobby fixed me with a stare and said, "I think you need to hear Hugh's

story."

Hugh Lee Newell was a driver with the Columbus Fire Department. The apparatus was of the open cab style and had no seat belts. The captain and driver sat up front while the firefighter stood on the tailboard. In October 1972, Hugh and his crew were responding to an emergency call. While making their way through traffic, disaster struck. Swerving to avoid another vehicle, the front wheels of their apparatus struck the street curb. The firefighter was thrown from the tailboard, and narrowly missed being run over by the rear wheels. The Captain maintained his seat, but Hugh was not as fortunate. Thrown from his position behind the steering wheel, Hugh landed in the truck's path. Unable to avoid his own vehicle, he was run over and killed.

While devastating, Hugh's death moved all the firefighters to action. Firefighter safety became the rallying cry of all who experienced the pain of Hugh's passing. Their impassioned pleas resulted in the retrofit of cabs to all Columbus Fire Department vehicles. This victory fell short of including seatbelts. The battle for seatbelts continued to rage on until 1984, when the retrofit of seatbelts was approved. Even this victory came with its own set of problems. Because of liability issues, the City Garage and other local repair shops refused to install the seatbelts. Having come so far, the men refused to surrender the fight. Training Officer Kenneth Moore installed the first few seatbelts himself. Wearing full turnouts and seat belts became standard procedure whenever an apparatus left the station. It was through these actions that the firefighters gave meaning to Hugh's death. The men of the Columbus Fire Department pledged themselves to safety, and strove to never again lose another friend to a preventable death.

After hearing the story of Hugh Lee Newell and the department's struggle for safety, I felt ashamed. How had attitudes in my department strayed so far from the ideals of 1984? Seat belt use was no longer a battle cry, just a tired safety message. I believed that the lack of seat belt usage in my department was an insult to the memory of Hugh Lee Newell. How many times as a firefighter had I refused to

buckle up, believing it slowed my response time? How many times as a driver had I pulled away from the station, knowing that my passengers were not secured by seat belts? I began to demand that passengers on my truck fasten their seat belts. I was often met with resistance, but after hearing the story of Hugh Lee Newell, most firefighters agreed to fasten their seat belts. Many other drivers began to take a firm stance on seat belt use. When confronted with an unbelted captain, Driver Mike Chandler refused to proceed on a call. Later, Mike told me he was prepared to face dire consequences, but that truck wasn't moving until all seat belts were fastened.

Convincing stubborn firefighters to wear seat belts is no easy task. My arguments for seat belt use often fell on deaf ears. Many department members resisted change, and saw the story of Hugh Lee Newell as ancient history. Several firefighters weren't born until well after Hugh's death in 1972. These younger firefighters simply couldn't relate to Hugh's story. That all changed with a visit from Mrs. Deana Vernon.

An opportunity for change came one station maintenance day. I washed the trucks as younger firefighters cleaned the down stair quarters. Mrs. Vernon entered the station with her young daughter following closely. She remarked that the child loved fire trucks, and asked about the possibility of a tour. Presented with the opportunity to leave our chores and entertain the excited child, we happily agreed. After viewing the trucks and turnout gear, the tour proceeded inside the station. "Do you know the man in this picture?" asked Mrs. Vernon, while pointing to Hugh Lee Newell. "Yes ma'am, he was one of our firefighters killed a long time ago," a young firefighter responded. Mrs. Vernon hugged her daughter and said, "Hugh was my father, and I am so touched that you guys remember him. I'm glad his death had some meaning. Just knowing all you guys can now wear seat belts makes me happy." With tear filled eyes, Mrs. Vernon recounted the media coverage of the department's fight for seat belts. "It was always front page news. I couldn't believe it took so long to get the seat belts," she said.

What a victory! Mrs. Vernon accomplished in five minutes what I failed to do with

weeks of reasoning. She put a face on her family's tragedy, and ended resistance to seat belt use for all those young firefighters. Hugh Lee Newell would be honored by a new generation of seat belt wearing firefighters.

I wish I could say that seat belt usage was 100% in the Columbus Fire Department, but that wouldn't be the truth. I know that cautionary tales and regulations won't change years of ingrained behavior. What I can say is that a change was made in my life after hearing the story of Hugh Lee Newell. My seat belt is fastened every time I climb into the driver's seat, and my truck doesn't move until every passenger has seat belts secured. I know that with each retelling of the Hugh Lee Newell story, another Columbus Firefighter decides to buckle up. Leadership can spring from the lower ranks of the fire service. The fire service regularly displays courage and determination when dealing with public emergencies. Do we have the strength to display these same attributes towards our fellow firefighters? Can we love another firefighter enough to say, "Buckle Up"?

There are more apparatus drivers in the fire service than chiefs. When all drivers make seat belt use a priority, only then can chiefs take seat belts off their priority list because the department will be in compliance.

I want to thank Duane Hughes for sharing his story and demonstrating what leadership in the fire service is all about. Battalion Chief Truman Oswald deserves recognition for honoring Hugh Lee and Driver Mike Chandler deserves a courage award.

Finally, all firefighters, officers, and chiefs need to promise Mrs. Deana Vernon and *our own family* that we will wear our seat belt. Because every life matters - even if you do not know them.